

Prince of peace

My War With the CIA

The Memoirs of Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

As Related to Wilfred Burchett.

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By JAMES C. THOMSON JR.

Norodom Sihanouk — "Samdech" or Prince to his Cambodian compatriots, "Monseigneur" to visiting foreigners, "Snooky" to his Washington detractors—is a man who has induced apoplexy in a 20-year succession of American Secretaries of State, generals and emissaries. Until early 1970 he had received their demands and blandishments and had outlasted all of them. And in so doing, he had achieved the impossible: kept Cambodia out of the Indochina War, an oasis of peace in a desert of hostilities. But then came the Lon Nol coup, and the United States invasion; and today Cambodia has been laid waste.

Sihanouk had special reasons for avoiding Washington's embrace. Cambodia is historically the Poland of Southeast Asia, caught between two martial peoples: the Thais, its Germany, to the west; and the Vietnamese, its Russia, to the east. Throughout history both powers have hacked away at the territory of the Cambodian, or Khmers, gentle heirs to the great civilization that built the palaces and temples of Angkor. In Sihanouk's time Washington was allied to both traditional enemies.

If the hostilities were to spread to Cambodia, it was fairly predictable that the consequence would be not only devastation and civil war but also dismemberment. So, from the early 1950's onward, first as King and then as Chief of State, Norodom Sihanouk steered his people on a course then deemed "immoral" by American statesmen, the course of neutralism. But his neutralism had its own special character, dictated by both the geopolitics of the region and the temperament of the man. It was frenetic rather than phlegmatic.

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That policy required nearly constant motion: a balancing act in the midst of a typhoon. Frequent gestures toward China were central to the act, for only Peking could, in the long run, protect against Bangkok and Saigon and simultaneously restrain the ambitions of Hanoi. But periodic moves in other directions were also essential. And by the early 1960's there was, as a result, nowhere in the world quite such a polyglot East-West mix of foreign-aid projects as one found in Cambodia (bringing complaints from Washington about the iniquity of "co-mingling").

To such a formidable task the Prince brought an appropriately hyperthyroid temperament. Vain and gregarious, volatile and shrewd, coquettish and choleric, earthy and cultivated — he seemed alternately fearsome and ridiculous to his adversaries, wise and bewildering to his friends.

But withal the act worked, from independence in 1953 to his ouster in March, 1970. Although Cambodia's eastern border regions were inevitably singled by the Vietnam war—through their violation by both Vietnamese factions and, from 1969, their secret bombardment by United States aircraft—Cambodia remained at peace, its independence preserved

under the one non-Communist leader in mainland Southeast Asia to achieve a formidable base of popular support at home. (Even his critics admitted it: "If only we had a Sihanouk for South Vietnam," lamented American officials in Saigon.)

The popular support came partly from style, partly good works. He was, after all, a Norodom, in the kingly line — a Buddhist father-prince and patron of the arts who ran a splendid little court with a nice degree of flamboyance. But he was also the one Southeast Asian ruler who—when not globe-trotting—spent more days in the countryside than in the capital city: dedicating irrigation systems, opening roads and clinics, receiving petitions from peasants, even kissing babies. And

further, his small army—unlike other Asian armies—was more boon than bane to the populace. Soldiers constructed the dams, laid out the roads, and even helped with the harvests.

Not that Sihanouk's Cambodia was in any sense flawless. There was, of course, the usual corruption in Phnom Penh ruling circles. Economic planning left much to be

desired, at least by M.I.T. standards. And the Prince's own highly personalist version of "guided democracy" sent dissenters of both the left and the right into prison, insurgency, or exile—and sometimes to their death.

Still, his nation was independent, unaligned, and at peace. And that was something of a miracle.

What happened in 1970 consumes a large part of Prince Sihanouk's awkward and uneven "memoirs," as told to the leftist Australian journalist, Wilfred Burchett. To put the thesis simply: the Central Intelligence Agency, long working for Sihanouk's overthrow, found willing accomplices in two of his associates while the Prince was off to Moscow, and masterminded the coup that exiled him to Peking.

A word about the text: a polemic undoubtedly loses much when told in French by a Cambodian to an Australian—who then translates it into English. This polemic also wanders back and forth in time and place. It is variously shrill, boisterous and self-serving. But it does

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As for the thesis of C.I.A. complicity: prior to the Watergate revelations, I would have found it most unlikely. After Watergate, almost anything seems possible in terms of Presidential abuse of the relative integrity of the C.I.A. in its post-Bay of Pigs phase. It is indisputable that the Agency did in fact give covert support to Sihanouk's long arch-rival, Son Ngoc Thanh, and his Khmer Serei rebels in the late 1950's. It is also true, however, that the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, seeking accommodations with the Prince, directed the Agency to cease all such support.

But a directive given is not always a directive obeyed. And at the least one can be certain that intermediate links on the chain of American contact with the Khmer Serei and other anti-

Sihanouk elements in Vietnam and Thailand gave the wink of approval—and conveyed thereby the impression of United States support—to those who finally mounted the plot. One way or another, the Khmer Serei participated in the coup, and Son Ngoc Thanh became Prime Minister in the Lon Nol Government.

But far greater than any crime of covert complicity in Sihanouk's overthrow is what happened next: the overt American invasion of Cambodia on April 30, 1970. By that senseless act the Nixon Administration destroyed all that Sihanouk had achieved: the shielding of Cambodia from the Indochina War and the preservation of Cambodia's independence. By that act, and by its sequel, the obliteration bombing of Cambodia, the Nixon Administration has gone far toward the destruction of Khmer civilization. Of all "high crimes" this President is accused of, that may well rank among the highest.

And what, after all, was accomplished by Mr. Nixon's willingness to do what his predecessors had regularly rejected? The loss of virtually all the Cambodian countryside to pro-Communist Cambodian forces; and the disintegration of the Lon Nol Government in military, political, and economic spheres. This judgment is not only Sihanouk's—a highly biased source. It is also that of the best reporters on the scene, including those gifted investigators for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moosc, whose several published studies of Southeast Asia have coolly documented the gathering Cambodian tragedy.

So all that has stood between the architects of the 1970 coup and disaster is American obliteration bombing — now terminated by the Congress at very long last.

Does the mercurial Prince have a future? He currently presides, from his Peking exile, over the Khmer National United Front, the coalition of insur-

gent forces. But he is still, despite ego, a realist: he stands ready to remain as Chief of State in a post-Lon Nol settlement as a "working symbol" of Khmer unity and he has proposed the establishment of diplomatic relations between such a government and the United States, on condition that all aid to the Lon Nol party is ended. But power, he senses, will lie elsewhere. And the new Cambodia will undoubtedly move much to the left under his new-found insurgent allies.

Will Southeast Asia's Poland survive its American interlude? It's a close question; but the answer may still lie in the person of Norodom Sihanouk. ■